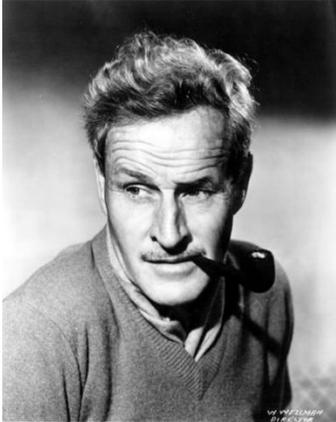




THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

William A. Wellman

Born: February 29, 1896 – Died: December 9, 1975



William Augustus Wellman worked on over 80 films, primarily as a director. Notable for his work in crime, adventure and action genre films, often focusing on aviation themes - particular passion. He also directed several well regarded satirical comedies. Wellman, the Oscar-winning storywriter-director of the original *A Star Is Born* (1937), was called "Wild Bill" during his World War I service as an aviator, a nickname that persisted in Hollywood due to his larger-than-life personality and lifestyle.

Wellman directed the 1927 film *Wings*, which became the first film to win an Academy Award for Best Picture at the 1st Academy Awards ceremony.

A hell-raiser when young, Wellman was expelled from Newton High School in Newton Highlands, Massachusetts, for dropping a stink bomb on the principal's head. Wellman made a living as a candy salesman and a cotton salesman and then at a lumber yard but was fired after losing control of a truck and driving it through the side of a barn. Eventually he wound up playing professional ice hockey in Massachusetts.

While playing at the Colonial Theatre in Boston, an actor named Douglas Fairbanks took note of him. Impressed by Wellman's good looks and the figure he cut on ice, the soon-to-be silent-film superstar suggested to him that he had what it took to become a movie actor. Wellman's dream was to become an aviator, but since his father "didn't have enough money for me to become a flier in the regular way... I went into a war to become a flier."

When he was 19 years old, WW I had begun in Europe. Through the intercession of his uncle, Wellman enlisted in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps as an ambulance driver. While in Paris, Wellman joined the French Foreign Legion and was assigned on December 3, 1917 as a fighter pilot and the first American to join N.87 *escadrille* in the Lafayette Flying Corps where he earned himself the nickname "Wild Bill" due to his devil-may-care style in the air and received the Croix de Guerre with two palms.

Film Career

Upon returning to the U.S, he was stationed in San Diego, Wellman would fly to Hollywood for the weekends in his Spad fighter, using Fairbanks' polo field in Bel Air as a landing strip. Fairbanks, fascinated with the true-life adventures of "Wild Bill" told the returning hero that he would help him break into the movies when the war was over, and he was as good as his word.

Fairbanks was directly responsible for Wellman being cast in the juvenile lead of *The Knickerbocker Buckaroo* (1919) and as a young officer in *Evangeline* (1919).

Goldwyn Pictures hired him as a messenger in 1920 and he soon worked his way up the ladder, first as an assistant cutter, then as an assistant property man, property man, assistant director and second-unit director.

His first assignment as an assistant director for Bernie Durning provided him with a work ethic that he adopted for future film work. One strict rule that Durning enforced was no fraternization with screen femme fatales, which almost immediately Wellman broke, leading to a confrontation and a thrashing from the director. Despite his transgression, both men became lifelong friends, and Wellman steadily progressed to more difficult first unit assignments.

Wellman made his directorial debut with *The Man Who Won* (1923) starring Dustin Farnum. (the silent film B-Western star whom Dustin Hoffman's star-struck mother named the future double-Oscar winner after). The film was a remake of the 1920 Fox film, *The Twins of Suffering Creek* that was directed by Scott Dunlap.

Fox Films gave Wellman his next directing credit in 1923 with the Buck Jones western *Second Hand Love* (1923) and, other than the Dustin Farnum picture *The Man Who Won* (1923), he turned out Jones pictures for the rest of his time at Fox. The studio fired him in 1924 after he asked for a raise after completing *The Circus Cowboy* (1924), another Buck Jones film. Moving to Columbia, he helmed *When Husbands Flirt* (1925), then went over to MGM for the slapstick comedy *The Boob* (1926) before landing at Famous Players-Lasky (now known as Paramount Pictures after its distribution unit), where he directed *The Cat's Pajamas* (1926) and *You Never Know Women* (1926). It was as a contract director at the now renamed Paramount-Famous Players-Lasky Corp. that he had his breakout hit, due to his flying background – *Wings*.

Paramount entrusted its epic WW I flying epic *Wings* (1927) for Wellman to direct. *Wings*, a major war drama dealing with fighter pilots during World War I was highlighted by air combat and flight sequences. The film culminates with the epic Battle of Saint-Mihiel.

In the 1st Academy Awards it was one of two films to win top awards. *Sunrise* received an artistic award of excellence. *Wings* received the final award of the evening for Best Production. The next year, Best Production was replaced by Best Picture and, retroactively so as not to cause confusion, *Wings* became the Best Picture. Note: this is what the academy wrote for the *Wings* Best Production at the first Academy Awards: “the most outstanding motion picture considering all elements that contribute to a picture’s greatness.”

Paramount paid Wellman \$250 a week to direct "*Wings*". It also covered a role for himself, as a German pilot. He “demonstrated” to the new stunt pilots how to crash a plane. He flew, landed and rolled over one of the German Planes!

The massive production employed 3,500 soldiers, 65 pilots and 165 aircraft. It also went over budget and over schedule due to Wellman's perfectionism, and he came close to being fired more than once. The film took a year to complete, but when it was released it turned out to be one of the most financially successful silent pictures ever released and helped put Gary Cooper, whom Wellman personally cast in a small role, on the path to stardom. "*Wings*" and Wellman's next flying picture, *The Legion of the Condemned* (1928) --in which Cooper had a starring role--initiated the genre of the World War One aviation movie, which included such famous works as Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels* (1930) and Howard Hawks' *The Dawn Patrol* (1930). Despite his success in bringing in the first Best Picture Oscar winner, Paramount did not keep Wellman under contract.

Wellman's reputation on the set was for shooting films fast and efficient. The hard-drinking director usually oversaw a riotous set, in line with his own lifestyle.

He married five women, including a Ziegfeld Follies showgirl, before settling down with Dorothy Coonan Wellman, a former Busby Berkeley dancer. Wellman believed that Dorothy saved him from becoming a caricature of himself. She appeared as a tomboy in *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933), a Depression-era social commentary picture made for the progressive Warner Bros. studio (and which is a favorite of Martin Scorsese).

It came two years after Wellman's masterpiece, *The Public Enemy* (1931), one of the great early talkies, one of the great gangster pictures and the film that made James Cagney a superstar. Scorsese says that Wellman's use of music in the film influenced his own first gangster picture, *Mean Streets* (1973).

Wellman was as adept at comedy as he was at macho material, helming the original *A Star Is Born* (1937) (for which he won his only Oscar, for best original story) and the biting satire *Nothing Sacred* (1937), both of which starred Fredric March, for producer David O. Selznick. Both movies were dissections of the fame game, as was his satire *Roxie Hart* (1942), which reportedly was one of Stanley Kubrick's favorite films.

During World War Two Wellman continued to make outstanding films, including *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), *Lady of Burlesque* (1943) and *Story of G.I. Joe* (1945), and after the war he turned out another war classic, *Battleground* (1949). In the 1950s Wellman's best later films co-produced and starring John Wayne, *Island in the Sky* (1953) and influential aviation *The High and the Mighty* (1954), for which he received his third and last best director Oscar nomination. His final film hearkened back to his World War One service, *Lafayette Escadrille* (1958), which featured the unit in which Wellman had flown. He retired as a director after making the film, reportedly enraged at Warner Bros.' post-production tampering with a film that meant so much to him.

While he was primarily a director, Wellman also produced ten films, one of them uncredited, all of which he also directed. His last film was *Lafayette Escadrille* (1958), which he produced, directed, wrote the story for and narrated. He wrote the screenplay for two other films that he directed, and one film that he did not direct, 1936's *The Last Gangster*. He also wrote the story for *A Star Is Born* and received a story credit for both remakes in 1954 and 1976.

Wellman was known for his disdain for actors in general, and actresses in particular, "Movie stardom isn't about acting ability - it's personality and temperament", he stated in 1952, and added, "I once directed Clara Bow. She was mad and crazy but WHAT a personality!"

Many actors disliked working with him, because he bullied them to get the performance he wanted. Wellman liked to work fast. Even though he hated their narcissism, he preferred working with men, because they did not need as much preparation time before shooting as women did. Despite all this, Wellman managed to elicit Oscar-nominated performances from seven different actors: Fredric March and Janet Gaynor (*A Star Is Born*), Brian Donlevy (*Beau Geste*), Robert Mitchum (*The Story of G.I. Joe*), James Whitmore (*Battleground*), and Jan Sterling and Claire Trevor (*The High and the Mighty*).

In his career, Wellman won a single Academy Award, for the story of *A Star Is Born*. He was nominated as best director three times, for *A Star Is Born*, *Battleground* and *The High and the Mighty*, for which he was also nominated by the Directors Guild of America as best director. In 1973, the DGA honored him with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Wellman also has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, at 6125 Hollywood Blvd.

Several filmmakers have examined Wellman's career. Richard Schickel devoted an episode of his PBS series *The Men Who Made the Movies* to Wellman in 1973, and in 1996, Todd Robinson directed the feature-length documentary, *Wild Bill: Hollywood Maverick*, a long-time passion of son, William Wellman Jr. who created and executive produced the film.

Other than David O. Selznick, few producers and studio executives liked the hell-raising iconoclast Wellman. Louis B. Mayer's daughter Irene Mayer Selznick, the first wife of David O. Selznick, said that Wellman was "a terror, a shoot-up-the-town fellow, trying to be a great big masculine I-don't-know-what". *IMDb Mini Biography By: Jon C. Hopwood & Wikipedia*

Trivia:

He was discovered while playing hockey by Douglas Fairbanks, who encouraged him to come to Hollywood. Wellman obliged by flying his Spad and landing on a polo field located in Fairbanks' backyard. After an acting job in Fairbanks' *The Knickerbocker Buckaroo* (1919), Wellman worked as a messenger boy, property man, assistant cutter and assistant director before directing his first film in 1923.

Gary Cooper, James Cagney, James Garner, Susan Hayward, Ida Lupino and Robert Mitchum, Buddy Rogers, Rosalind Russell were all elevated to stardom after appearing in a Wellman film.

Loretta Young, who made four films with Wellman, referred to him as "a fine director. He was one of the best-looking men I had ever seen. Every actress he worked with, including me, had a crush on him".

According to Eddie Bracken Wellman "was truly a wild man by being overly energetic. His muscles would move when he talked. He had a marvelous sense of humor. Bill was the kind of guy who would play an awful lot on the set. He would build bonfires under the director's chair when someone else was sitting there or give you a hot foot. He'd have a whip that had an electric charge in it and then touch you on the fanny, and you'd jump sky high. He was a practical joker and a tough man. Put up your fists against Bill, and you had a fight going on that would take at least an hour to end. He was just that type of man, and yet he was a patsy at the same time. People loved him, of course".

Barbara Stanwyck was his favorite actress.

The High and the Mighty (1954) was the biggest grosser of all his films.

Story of G.I. Joe (1945) was Wellman's favorite of all his films.

Personal Quotes

"Get a director and a writer and leave them alone. That's how the best pictures get made. When I made *The Public Enemy* (1931), I was way ahead in thinking. No love story but loaded with sex and violence."

"The best director is the director whose handprints are not on the film."

"I couldn't stand being an actor. I haven't liked many actors anyway, and I've directed most of them. One of my sons is an actor and it breaks my heart, but there's nothing I can do about it. Frankly, if you examine my whole background, it's not very good. I can tell you that for every good picture, I made at least five or six stinkers."

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